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AUTHOR Anderson, Marjorie
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ABSTRACT

Psychological masks can become the accepted facade of people who struggle to camouflage their real selves. Sometimes parents label a child as "lazy" or "stupid"; teachers may follow suit by labeling a child "slow learner" or "uncooperative." Healthy self-esteem is based on three main concepts: "I am lovable; I am capable; I am unique." Students need to get in touch with that unique, capable, lovable self that is being suffocated by the masks they have created. Students can be empowered by helping them incorporate the following skills in their lives: (1) focus on the positive; (2) accept yourself; (3) take responsibility for actions/choices; and (4) choose to be happy. (NKA)

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# UNMASKING POSITIVE SELF-ESTEEM

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Masks are common elements of many cultures. Theater masks make dramatic decorating and fashion statements. Halloween masks provide opportunity for disguise or trickery. Facial masques promise eternal beauty. Masks may be used for protection or to ward off evil spirits.

Another kind of mask has quietly become the accepted facade of people who struggle to find an effective way to camouflage their real self. Psychological masks are used to hide the "worthless" me.

This concept of worthlessness is not inborn. Feelings of self-worth are learned, not inherited. If we come into this life with no preprogrammed set of beliefs about self, how do we form that crucial self-concept?

Let me introduce the theory of LABELS. The purpose of a label is to identify something, to tell what is inside. A label on a can of Campbells soup tells me if it is Tomato or Cream of Chicken or Vegetable Beef. The jacket on a book indicates whether I will be reading Tale of Two Cities or Webster's Dictionary.

However, labels can be misleading. Someone may mistakenly (or purposely) replace a correct label with a false one so that what is inside is not the same as what the label indicates.

Our self-concept is determined largely by the labels that are imposed upon us by others. Parents are usually the first source of labels in a child's life. "Wonderful," "Precious,"

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"Darling," may soon give way to "Lazy," "Stupid," No good."

Teachers may follow suit by labeling a child "Discipline Problem," "Slow Learner," "Uncooperative."

Peers, siblings, other relatives as well as social groups and media continue to influence one's sense of self by adding more, usually negative, labels. For example, advertisers subtly, but very emphatically imply that if a woman is not 5'8", 115 lbs with beautiful blond hair, she doesn't fit society's picture of the perfect female.

If a child is told often enough that s/he is stupid, lazy, shy, awkward etc., s/he unconsciously will internalize that quality until it appears to be the truth. In reality, the child has created a mask depicting "stupid, lazy, shy, awkward, etc." that is covering up the truth, the <u>real</u> self-worth.

Healthy self-esteem is based on three main concepts. These are the internal truths that ARE inborn, are inherent in every child (and adult). We simply lose sight of them behind the many masks we wear.

**!! I AM LOVABLE - I AM CAPABLE - I AM UNIQUE !!**

**I AM LOVABLE**. I matter simply because I exist. My worth is not contingent upon my size, my gender, my GPA, my religion, my boy/girl friend, my socio-economic status, my race, etc. "I know I'm worth something, cuz God don't made junk!"

**I AM CAPABLE**. I can handle myself and my environment with confidence. I have something of value to offer a family, a group, a club, a community, etc.

**I AM UNIQUE**. There is no one like me. I am an original,

one-of-a-kind. This supports the "I am lovable" and "I am capable" concepts.

I am lovable because there is no one else like me, no one else has exactly my same talents, interests, skills, etc. By the same token the things I have to offer others are unique, individual, exceptional.

But how do students get in touch with that unique, capable, lovable self that is being suffocated by the masks they have created? It's hard to use tools they haven't been given. After all, how many of them had Self-Esteem 101 in Jr, High?

Empower your students by helping them incorporate the following skills in their lives:

**FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE**

Attitude comes from within. It's how we feel about something. Because of all the negative labels thrown at young people today from so many sources, it's not surprising that their attitudes about themselves are negative.

"Where your focus goes, your energy flows." If you look for the negative in a person or situation, that's what you'll find. As instructors, we can show students how to focus on the positive.

A simple way to start is to give yourselves and your students a challenge. Each night before you go to bed identify three joys for that day. Write down three things that made you feel good. It can be something as simple as the fact that the sun was shining or as big as an A on a test.

The more consistently you do this, the easier it becomes and

you'll discover that what you look for is what you'll find.

In addition to ending the day with positive memories, practice starting the day with a positive thought. Before you go out the door, look yourself in the eye and tell yourself it's going to be a great day.

Or step outside, fill your lungs with fresh air and shout, "Everyone in the world is out to....MAKE ME HAPPY!" Stifle a chuckle and sally forth to face the world.

**ACCEPT YOURSELF**

Sure we all have things about ourselves we don't particularly like (my nose is too big, my hair is too straight, I have poor study habits). Learn to concentrate on your strengths not on what you have been conditioned to perceive as weaknesses.

List three things you like about yourself; successes you've had, talents, physical characteristics, personality traits. Make sure they are specific. Things like "nice" or "cute" are too general. Periodically, add new qualities to this list.

Do something nice for yourself. You are the most important person in your life and really the only person you are ultimately responsible for. Are you running on empty.

You should be your own best friend and "best friendships" require nurturing. Spend some time getting to know you. Nurture yourself by giving approving, accepting, reassuring messages to yourself about yourself. If you treated your friends like you treat yourself, would you have any?

There will always be people who will do their best to make you feel bad. When this happens, look them straight in the eye

and declare (vocally or mentally), "No matter what you do or say to me, I am a worthwhile person!"

The more you say it, the more you'll believe it!

**TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR ACTIONS/CHOICES**

Self-esteem seems to plummet when life is out of control. Or maybe life seems more out of control when self-esteem is low.

How often do we hear ourselves/students say, "I had no choice," "My parents made me...," "I had to do..."?

Self-esteem suffers when we think others are controlling what is happening to us.

Each day we are faced with innumerable choices. Some of them are easy. We don't have any trouble accepting responsibility when we have a choice between a positive and a negative (watch TV vs study for a test). I chose to watch TV, Mom didn't force me to do it. I may have to suffer the consequences, but it was still my choice.

We sometimes choose between a positive and a positive (cake vs pie). It's easy to accept responsibility for choosing pie.

The problem comes when we are faced with a choice between a negative and a negative. Ask several students to give you an example of something s/he <u>had</u> to do but didn't want to.

Some examples might be: "I <u>have</u> to go to school," "I <u>had</u> to tend my little brothers," "I <u>have</u> to go to work."

When we are faced with two negative choices, we always choose the one that is the least painful. Show your students that it is still a choice.

"What would happen if you didn't go to school?"

"My parents would ground me" or "I would get kicked out of school" or "I wouldn't learn anything, then I couldn't get a job."

"So, which is the least painful, going to school (tending children, going to work) or getting suspended (having your parents angry, getting fired)?"

Instead of using self-defeating words like "have to," "made me," "no choice," take control by using the language of responsibility. "Even though I don't like (a particular situation), I'd rather..., I prefer..., I choose...."

**CHOOSE TO BE HAPPY**

Happiness IS a choice. No matter what the situation is, you can choose to look at it differently.

Associate with people who feel good about themselves. They can help you feel good about yourself. Avoid people who are participating in self-destructive behavior (drug abuse, pornography, illegal activity of any kind). Both positive and negative attitudes are contagious. Decide which one you'd rather catch.

SMILE! Studies show that your smile muscles send the same positive signals to your nervous system whether you are actually happy or just faking it. Fake it long enough and it becomes fact.

As students learn to Focus of the Positive, Accept Themselves and Take Responsibility For Their Choices, they will be well on their way to developing a healthier self-esteem. Then the choice to BE HAPPY will be easier for them to make.